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ABSTRACT

The Harvard University Center for Moral Education is conducting research on Kohlberg's assumption that development of moral thinking and of practical understanding of democratic institutions may be most effective in schools where students judge the moral atmosphere to be just. Students perceptions of three types of school are compared: (1) traditional high schools where administrators make the important decisions, (2) laissez-faire "open classroom" schools where there are no rigid rules, and (3) democratic schools where the student community participates in policy making. The comparison was made by using the author's Moral Atmosphere Scoring System, involving hour-long interviews of 12 randomly selected students at each of the three types of school. Findings show clear qualitative differences in perceptions of "rules and authority" in the three schools: 82% of the students at the democratic school accepted that atmosphere; 17% at traditional schools accepted their atmosphere; and 42% at the laissez-faire school approved of the rules. These preliminary indications that students evaluate settings in terms of their perceived justice must be followed by conceptual and methodological progress before one can genuinely categorize school moral atmospheres and link them to changes in ethical reasoning. (AV)

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THE DEVELOPMENTALISTS' APPROACH TO ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING

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Introduction

Democratic socialization in American education has been assigned primarily to the social studies classroom. While there have been notable, effective classroom efforts to teach the logic of constitutional democracy(eg., the work of Fenton(1960), Oliver(1956), etc.), these curricula have clearly not had significant impact in producing citizens able to grapple with the problems of democratic life. Even where conducted in an expert manner, students emerge with an abstracted understanding of democracy. Students may understand the names, titles, and even the underlying ideas of democratic institutions but usually emerge with little feel for democracy's power or potential abuses.

Democratic Education

To possibly remedy this gap between the requirements of democratic society and its educational institutions, three democratic school projects were initiated, each using Kohlberg's theory of moral education as an ideological and psychological base.

Kohlberg's theory offers that social ideas develop in a sequence of six invariant stages. Each stage offers a more comprehensive notion of society and its relationship to individual rights.

At stage one there is an orientation towards punishment and obedience. Law is conceived as the force of the powerful to which the weaker submit. At stage two, right action becomes that which satisfies one's own needs. Law is conceived of in terms of the rules of expedience or a naive rational hedonism("In America, the laws says everyone can get what he wants".). Stage three offers what we call the good boy/good girl orientation. Law becomes associated with collective opinion. One obeys the law because that is what others expect. At stage four there is a shift towards fixed definitions of law and social duty. The law is justified in terms of its order-maintaining function. "Without law, the entire fabric of society would crumble." Stage five is a legalistic-

contract orientation. Law becomes the agreed-upon contract among social equals with duties of state and individual clearly defined and regulated. At stage six Kohlberg argues that there is a rational basis for ethical decision-making. Here, the law is a repository for broader social principles and is subordinate where law and justice conflict.

The rate and extent of development are closely linked to the institutions with which one comes into contact. Broadly speaking, social institutions enccuraging social role-taking and productive moral dialogue are associated with rapid and complete moral develpment. In terms of reasoning about specific legal issues, experiences with what Kohlberg calls the secondary institutions of society(eg., law, economy, education, etc.)are of special importance.

It has long been established that participation in democratically organized institutions is associated with rapid social development. Both Cooley(1916) and Mead(1933) suggested that democratic groups offer possibilities for interdependence and mutual sharing not found in authoritarian groups. Lewin(1945) suggests likewise that ideological change occurs more rapidly in democratic groups allowing for a shared sense of control and for opportunities for dissent. Argyris(1974) similarly observes that democratic groups facilitate more mature ego structures than do coercive organizations.

In addition, Kohlberg offers that individuals placed in "an institution-maintaining perspective" tend to develop more rapidly than do individuals in an obedience perspective. Thus he observes that gang-leaders show higher stage thinking than do gang-followers(Kohlberg, 1967). Similarly, in traditional schools, student leaders show higher stage thinking than do regular students. As well, preliminary evidence from Kibbutz youth indicates that the collective-democratic structure of the Kibbutz youth-group stimulates adolescents towards principled thought more rapidly than do the best American suburban educational environments (Kohlberg, 1973).

Three democratic schools have adopted somewhat similar orientations. In the Cambridge "Cluster School", the Brookline "School Within a School", and the Irvine, California "SELF School" there is a common effort

to "turn over" as many issues as possible to the student community. The schools hold a weekly or twice-weekly community meeting where major issues are posed, debated, and resolved. Each school has oriented its curriculum to include intensive offerings on political problems and dilemmas. Finally, in all three schools there is a conscious effort to pose dilimmas, occuring within the school, as moral, as opposed to simply practical issues. Thus a "pot smoking" offense is dealt with as a conflict between community and individual rights, rather than an issue of school "law and order".

The schools differ in several respects, though. The Cambridge and Brookline projects contain roughly seventy students each and exist as sub-units of larger high schools. The "SELF School" has nearly 250 students and is housed in a warehouse apart from the main high school. Both "Cluster" and the "School Within a School" use a direct democracy format with almost all issues raised before the entire student body. The "SELF School" operates as a representative democracy with students being elected at-large to what is called the "Rep Council".

During the first year of operation, some surprisingly similar issues emerged in each of the three schools; the issue of drugs became an immediate concern in each school. The three programs established drug rules and enforced them. "AWOL's", "Skips", and "hooks" were similarly addressed with students arriving at appropriate attendance standards and penalties. As the three schools prepared for a second year, "Admissions" procedures became a critical question in the democratic alternative. In the "Cluster School", the student town meeting voted to accept sixteen black students to racially "balance the school". The California "SELF School" decided to randomize admissions. The Brookline "School Within a School" voted for students to interview their incoming peers.

To illustrate this process of democratic decision-making, let me offer an example from a recent meeting at the Brookline "SWS" project. The students in the school had come to feel that staff were "plotting" town meeting strategies at their weekly staff-meeting and "were better prepared than were the students". They demanded to have students present at staff meetings (Barb and Bill are teachers):

Ellie: I really know that you(teachers)are not doing anything bad in there to us, but I feel that we should be able to come to your meetings.

Tom: That's right. "SWS" is supposed to be a family. When you are in your house, you can go wherever you please. Why not here.

Betsey: I agree with Tom; but in a family, parents have a right to meet together sometimes. Like, let's say they are talking about paying the bills, or a vacation; can't they meet by themselves before they present it to the kids?

Peter(Consultant): I hear two models here. One, a family model, the other, a power model. Do you really think the teachers and students are like a family, or do they really have different interests?

Barb: I feel there isn't really an issue. In 90% of our meetings we just talk about "dippity-do". It isn't worth coming to, <u>especially</u> at "8" in the morning.

Sue: We can get up. As to Peter's question, I think they have their needs; we have ours. It's not that we don't trust them, though.

Bill: How about if the students find a time in the day to plot about (Teacher) community meetings. Then they will be prepared, too.

Leslie: But you have "A-block" reserved. When could all the students meet?

Betsey: I still think we don't have a right to come. They should be able to meet without us.

Bill: I don't know about all this. We have a bunch of things that don't concern you. Don't private groups have a right to meet privately?

(The group eventually voted, by a small margin, to allow teachers to meet privately.)

The key to the town meetings is that conflicts are dealt with explicitly as moral conflicts. The issue of staff privacy is a good moral issue for

stage three and stage four students. The stage three position that Tom offers("SWS" is a family and kids/students "can go all over" the house/school) conflicts with Betsey's stage four notion that the parents/ teachers have a special privilege to meet privately. This type of debate might be expected to produce moral change if conducted seriously and continually.

Traditional, Laissez-Faire, and Democratic Schooling

These efforts in democratic education may be contrasted with both traditional "comprehensive" high schools as well as with alternative schools with laissez-faire ideologies. In traditional high-schools there is little role or encouragement for most students to become involved in important school policy decisions. While there might be "a student council", important decisions are made by administrators often with little faculty or student involvement. As well, a rotating schedule(i.e., first period: Math; second period: Social Studies; etc.) mitigates against the creation of even the most superficial forms of school community.

Alternative education in the past ten years has made some inroads into the hegemony of the traditional comprehensive school. As Silberman (1967) observes, most alternatives are based on the "open-classroom" model with an ideology of free-choice and individualized instruction. Reacting to what is seen as the "lockstep" of the traditional high school, students are offered opportunities, often free from formal evaluation by teachers or peers, to choose learning activities.

This laissez-faire model differs from the democratic approach represented by the "SELF", "SWS", and "Cluster" experiments. In most laissez-faire schools students are given a choice of attendance. It is assumed that if attendance is not required, then students will gradually choose to attend school and will perform out of intrinsic interest, rather than from a fear of being punished or down-graded.

This contrasts with the approach used at "SELF", "SWS", and "Cluster" schools where the issue of attendance is seen as a conflict between group and individual to be resolved by the student-teacher community. In the

democratic alternatives, for example, students agree to a contract requiring attendance. This is enforced by the "Rep Council" or "Discipline Committee". Similarly, democratic schools emphasize group projects and learning activities. This contrasts with the free-choice learning contracts found in most "open" alternatives. Finally, in most laissez-faire alternatives, teachers are loathe to act as what they call "disciplinarians". In contrast, in democratic alternatives, discipline is removed from the unilateral hands of the faculty and is transfered to the student-faculty community. In this new form, it is seen as a positive educational and social issue for group debate.

Initial Research(Hypothesis and Subjects)

Initial research has focused on student perceptions of the justice of decision-making in the new democratic alternatives. It has been assumed by Kohlberg that school environments perceived as just will tend to encourage optimum moral development. This assumption(clearly critical in the approach) is now being carefully researched in a study being conducted by Kohlberg, Scharf, Mosher, Fenton and other members of the Center for Moral Education at Harvard University. This research program will measure the degree to which moral change among students correlates with independent measures of school moral atmosphere.

As an initial step to understand the relationship between school moral atmosphere and moral change, we decided to compare student-perceptions of democratic, traditional, and laissez-faire schools. The author interviewed 12 students(selected randomly) in the "SELF", a traditional school in a nearby school district, and a self-defined "open", laissez-faire, an alternative school in a nearby Orange County school district. The traditional school was selected as it appeared quite typical of small(1000 students) comprehensive schools. The laissez-faire school was selected as seemingly typical of "open", "free-choice" schools in the area, and because the teachers appeared content with the definition of their approach of emphasizing the "laissez-faire" ideology.

Instruments

A new method of scoring environmental perceptions, called the Moral

Atmosphere Scoring System(M.A.S.S.), was developed by the author of this study. The instrument involves an hour-long interview probing student perceptions of program goals, rules, student and teacher roles. Fixed criteria were developed for each aspect of moral atmosphere to determine if the student accepts, rejects, or is ambivalent towards a particular aspect of moral atmosphere.

Procedures

Trained interviewers were used in gathering the data for the study. The interviewers were University of California(Irvine) students with no affiliation with the experimental project. Interviews were hand written, and trained scorers, who scored each interview without knowledge of the interviewee, analyzed them. An interjudge reliability of .85 was achieved among Moral Atmosphere raters. Qualitative analysis was conducted after ratings were established.

Results

Clear qualitative differences were found in the perceptions of "rules and authority" in the three schools.

The "SELF" school's democracy was accepted by most of the students interviewed in the school, and almost all of the students(ten out of twelve) perceived themselves as being "authors" of the school rules. One student offered:

> We made the rules in here. Jack(The School Manager) made suggestions, but we agreed, and we proposed our own. It was a group thing. That's what the first two monthly meetings were about, making rules, like the "pot rule".

The students believed that the rules were generally necessary. One student commented that, "You need these rules for the school to survive". Another suggested, "that though some conflict, they are genuinely needed". Where the students were critical of the "SELF" rules structure it was because either "we should enforce the rules stricter" or because "Some kids in here don't understand the rules yet". Overall, the "SELF" students

feel a high degree of ownership of both school and rules. Students were surprisingly critical of themselves, or other students, for failings in the school. For example, one student commented:

> Things get screwed up, but we can go to the town meeting and propose things....If other kids agree then the "rep council" does something it can change. The problem is not that many kids really care....It's just a few in here, but that could change if kids could be changed.

The traditional school perceptions revealed a great perceived distance from the rule-makers and students. Eight out of twelve students perceived the school-board as making school rules. Two students suggested the "teachers made them". The remaining two students felt that the Principal created the rules.

The rules were generally seen as arbitrary:

> Like the late pass thing. It's just a thing for the convenience of the school secretary. Even if you got an important thing it's "go get a late pass".

The students usually blamed the Principal, or the personalities of the teachers, for failings in the rules. A few students(four out of twelve) thought the Principal was generally fair in his decisions: "Mr. X usually is fair to you. He listens and then makes a decision. He doesn't yell or nothing". The most striking difference between the democratic and traditional school perceptions was the lack of sense of control students perceived in changing school rules. One student perceived that "it was up to the Principal". Another suggested simply that "the school's rules don't change".

The laissez-faire school's rules presented a somewhat ambiguous portrait. Most(eight out of twelve) students perceived the student body as making rules. An equal number, however, perceived rules as totally inadequate. One student suggested, "They're too lenient and not enforced". Another, when asked if they are fair, said, "Generally, they are fair

towards the students but not fair towards (this school)". Another offered:

> No, the rules aren't strict enough. People get away with too much in here. It kind of sets a contempt for the rules since people know they aren't going to have any consequences ...they should have mandatory attendance...it would be neat if people did things with other people besides their friends.

Strangely enough(or predictably enough) the laissez-faire school was characterized by a high degree of perceived helplessness in terms of changing the rules. One student characteristically offered:

> You got to do something. If they had some rules then people would AT LEAST GET SOMETHING DONE....If they made classes mandatory, kids would feel like they belonged to something...but it probably won't change. NO ORGANIZATION....

The few students who approved of the rules, as they existed, offered justifications much like those articulated by the teachers. One student commented:

> No rules are good rules. People should be self-disciplined and regulated. The people who participated in the rule-making think they are fair. Those that didn't participate are now bitching.

Summary coding of evaluations of fairness indicated significant differences among the three schools. A chi-square test indicated that the distribution of ratings was significant at the .01 level.

These differences should be understood as merely preliminary indications that students actively evaluate settings in terms of their perceived justice. The more critical test is the link between these perceptions of moral atmosphere and the development of moral thinking. This we noted is our current research problem.

Type of School	Student Rules Perception ACCEPTS	AMBIVALENT	REJECTS
"SELF" (DEMOCRATIC)	10 (83%)	1 (8%)	1 (8%)
TRADITIONAL SCHOOL	2 (17%)	4 (33%)	6 (50%)
LAISSEZ-FAIRE ALTERNATIVE	5 (42%)	3 (25%)	4 (33%)

Implications

The Just Community ideal represents, in my view, the most significant application of moral development theory to education. It suggests that while classroom discussions may effect the adolescents' ethical understanding, such efforts may be ineffective in creating a citizenry capable of grappling with the tasks of constitutional society. Critical to this effort is a conceptualization of the school's moral climate. While we have made preliminary steps to evaluate settings in terms of student perceptions of justice, we will need to make conceptual and methodological progress before we can genuinely catagorize school moral atmospheres and meaningfully link them to changes in ethical reasoning.